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NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Health

B.C. CELEBRATES NATIONAL IMMUNIZATION AWARENESS WEEK

VICTORIA – National Immunization Awareness Week runs from April 21-27, 2008 and is an opportunity to focus the attention of Canadians on the importance of vaccinations for all age groups, an issue that is all the more important given the recent resurgence of diseases such as measles and mumps.

"Government remains committed to ensuring British Columbians have the best immunization program available," said Health Minister George Abbott. "Funding for immunization in our province has more than doubled over the last five years to $33 million in 2007/08. As we add other vaccines in the future, our program will be strengthened even further. But for the program to be its most effective, people need to get their shots – and ensure that their children get immunized too."

Historically, immunization represents the single largest public health success of the 20th century. One hundred years ago, infectious diseases were the leading cause of death worldwide. In Canada, these now cause less than five per cent of all deaths, thanks to immunization programs undertaken from coast to coast to coast.

"The incredible effect immunization has had on public health for Canada and British Columbia has also meant that it has become a victim of its own success," said Dr. Perry Kendall, provincial health officer. "Thanks to immunization programs, by and large parents today don't have to worry about losing their children to vaccine-preventable illness."

Dr. Kendall added that challenges remain: "Many folks see immunization schedules as complicated, a formidable series of needles, and vaccinations not always available at convenient times. Then there's the problem of misinformation often via the Internet about the adverse effects of vaccination. It's no surprise then that through a mixture of complacency, inconvenience and misplaced concerns, too many people in B.C. remain under-immunized."

A timely caution came from Dr. Monika Naus, director of immunization at the BC Centre for Disease Control, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

"If immunization rates fall below a certain threshold, we could see vaccine-preventable diseases emerge again," warned Dr. Naus. "We are currently experiencing an outbreak of mumps in the Fraser Valley largely affecting an under-immunized community. What this shows is that even diseases that we don't see much of anymore still have the potential to cause harm by infecting those who are not fully protected. That's why being fully up-to-date with all of your shots is not only the best way to safeguard yourself, but also helps to protect the entire community. Immunization is as important as safe water in protecting health, and vaccines prolong and save lives."

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The current B.C. immunization schedule is comprised of vaccines that protect against 13 infectious diseases, including diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, polio, Haemophilus influenzae b, hepatitis B, meningococcal disease, pneumococcal disease, measles, mumps, rubella, chicken pox and influenza.

These vaccines are offered to a variety of age groups in settings that include public health units, child health clinics, physicians' offices, institutions and schools. The results of the recently introduced new vaccine for babies against pneumococcal disease have been nothing short of impressive. In children aged 12 to 23 months, the number of cases of pneumococcal disease in B.C. decreased from a total of 55 in 2002 to just 2 that could have been prevented by vaccine in 2007. An assessment of immunization rates of children in B.C. at their second birthday indicates that one out of three children is not as protected with vaccinations as they could be.

For more information on Immunization in British Columbia go to: www.immunizebc.ca or www.bccdc.org

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